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ABSTRACT

Contributed by English teachers across the United States, the activities contained in this booklet are intended to promote the effective teaching of literature and writing. Teaching strategies offered in the first section of the booklet are designed to stimulate language exploration and include activities in which students choose their favorite trite expressions in poems by Coleridge and Shakespeare and then write ballad stanzas to illustrate those cliches; imagine that they are famous artists and write self-portraits; keep music journals; and make speeches on topics taken from recent magazines and newspapers. Activities in the second section, which are designed to stimulate an appreciation and understanding of literature, require students to write their own versions of Swift's "A Modest Proposal"; create a literary poster that illustrates a passage the class has studied; give a five to seven minute talk in which they pretend to be movie directors describing how they would cast and shoot scenes in a given novel; engage in "inner and outer circle" discussions that allow only students from the outer circle to ask questions that those in the inner circle must answer. Teaching ideas in the third section provide various strategies for teaching different stages of the writing process. These include activities in which students pretend they are on vacation and write three humorous postcards; write romantic short stories; create a pre-writing "memory chain" about persons from their pasts; and keep a class journal in which everyone makes entries. (SAM)

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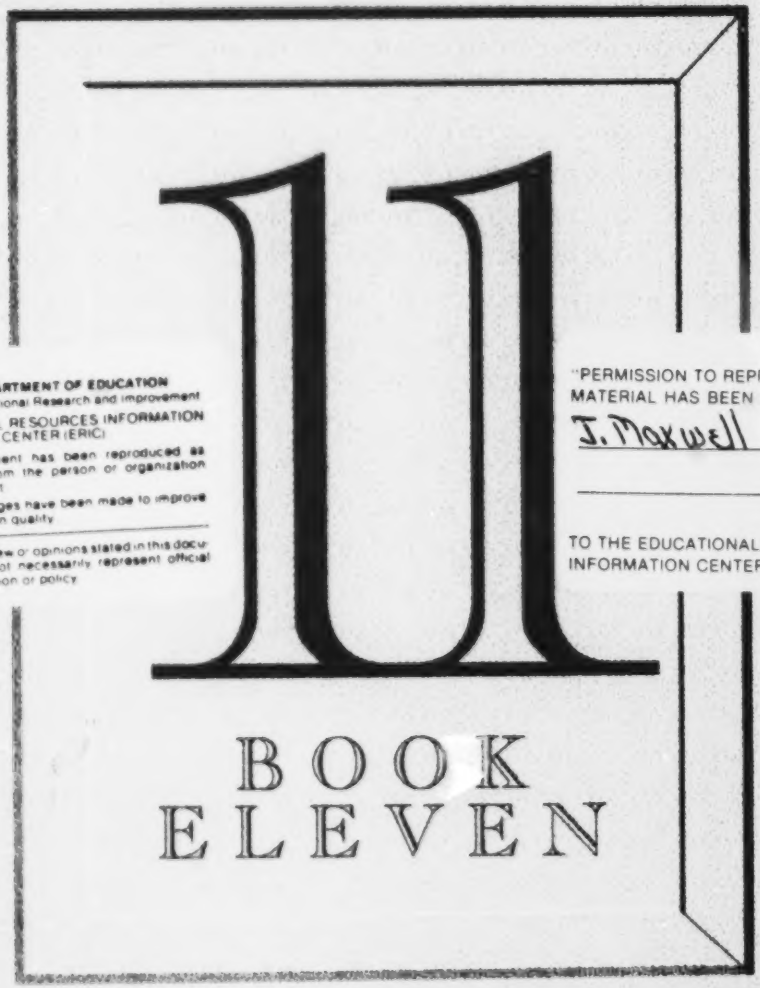
# IDEAS

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# IDEAS Plus

A Collection of Practical Teaching Ideas

Book Eleven

National Council of Teachers of English
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# Foreword

IDEAS Plus and its quarterly companion *NOTES Plus* are the principal benefits of *NCTE Plus* membership. *IDEAS Plus* is sent out at the end of the summer so that teachers will have it in hand as they begin the school year.

The ideas collected in this eleventh edition of *IDEAS Plus* come from two sources: ideas submitted at an Idea Exchange session at an NCTE Annual Convention or Spring Conference, and contributions by readers of *NOTES Plus* and *IDEAS Plus*.

# 1 Language Exploration

As our students gain mastery over their use of language, they are improving their ability to use clear thinking and to convey their thoughts in a logical and concise manner. This section on language exploration presents teaching strategies that will help students become better thinkers and better communicators. These activities will help students explore differences between clichés and metaphoric language, reflect on and express their values, approach the rhythm and expressiveness of poetry from a new direction, and become more involved participants in the classroom.

**Metaphoric Language**

Clichés, metaphoric language, and Coleridge or Shakespeare go hand in hand in this tried and true exercise. When I teach "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or introduce Shakespeare's language, I like to combine activities—cliché identification and writing poetic language—and to instill in my students an appreciation of the literature that we are reading, too.

This activity involves several steps. First, I help my students understand the difference between imaginative and trite language. I give them examples of both poetic excerpts and trite expressions on a handout similar to the following:

| *Coleridge says:* | *We might say:* |
|---|---|
| All in a hot and copper sky,<br>The bloody Sun, at noon,<br>Right up above the mast did stand,<br>No bigger than the Moon. | a broiling sun |
| And every tongue, through utter drought,<br>Was withered at the root;<br>We could not speak, no more than if<br>We had been choked with soot. | dying of thirst |

| *Coleridge says:* | *We might say:* |
| --- | --- |
| Fear at my heart, as at a cup,<br>My lifeblood seemed to sip! | scared to death |

Down dropped the breeze,
The sails dropped down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!

And now the Storm blast came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong.
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased us south along.

Oh happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare.

The last three stanzas are for students to match with a cliché from a list of nearly ninety that I give them. Possible answers are "dead as a doornail," "ill wind," and "beautiful beyond words." After we discuss why their selections match the poetic language, we look at the structure of the poetic language. In the case of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," we examine the ballad stanza's rhyme scheme and the line's rhythm and syllable count.

Last but not least, students choose their favorite trite expressions and write ballad stanzas that illustrate these cliches. After all is said and done, we share our creative efforts in groups and try to guess the clichés. Time flies with this exercise, and my students are pleased as punch with their efforts!

*Michael Groves, Nestucca Union High School, Cloverdale, Oregon*

**Reevaluating Values**

To help my students gain an understanding of what their own values are and to be able to express these values in words, I spend one class period a semester asking questions that concentrate on values. An added benefit is that students become more aware that different people have different values.

I begin by outlining the specific purposes of this exercise to my students:

1. To define what a value is to you.
2. To see that other people have different meanings for this word.
3. To consider your own values as they relate to a series of thought-provoking questions.
4. To think about why some of your classmates might feel differently than you do about certain things.
5. To enter into and enjoy a discussion on values, seeing that not everything is "black and white."

Following a general introduction to the class about what we are doing, I ask students to define the word *value*, especially as it relates to context and situation—and how "right" and "wrong" are often difficult to determine.

We then sit in a circle and answer questions from *The Book of Questions* (Workman, 1987). I read from the introduction to set the stage for the class:

> There are no correct or incorrect answers to these questions, only honest or dishonest ones. Can you know what you would do in a strange or hypothetical situation? Of course you can't, but why let that inhibit you? This is a chance to gain insights without actually living through the predicaments described . . . . Ignore the paradoxes of time-travel and the impossibility of various magical powers. Accept that conditions are as described, that odds are accurate, that promises will be fulfilled, and furthermore, that you know this when you are making your decisions.

My students always take time to give close consideration to the questions that I ask, as those queries force them to take a public stand on an issue. They choose their words carefully and give supporting reasons for the stands that they take.

Here are some of the questions that I've used with my classes, based on *The Book of Questions*, but adapted to my students:

1. In return for being given a one-week vacation with all expenses paid, would you be willing to kill a beautiful butterfly by tearing its wings off? What about a cockroach?
2. If you were to discover that your closest friend was a heroin dealer, what would you do?

3. Would you accept $1,000,000 to leave the country and never set foot in it again?
4. Would you have one of your fingers surgically removed if its removal would give you immunity from all major diseases? Which finger would you select? How about a hand?
5. Would you be willing to execute a man sentenced to death by the courts if you were selected by lot to do so, and if that man would go free if you didn't execute him? You have no details of the crime or the trial. What if you were to execute a woman? Would you be willing to execute a child? Would it matter to you how the person died?
6. Would it disturb you if, upon your death, your body were simply thrown into the woods and left there to rot? Why or why not?

Try this lesson plan. It stimulates students' critical thinking skills and provides an opportunity for self-expression. It can lead to a class discussion of what is happening in almost any literature selection that you use in your classroom, and it can lead students in nearly any direction that you feel is valuable for them.

*Greg Glau, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona*

**A Musical Approach to Poetry**

After a relatively unsuccessful conventional poetry unit, I tried a different approach with my freshmen. I decided to use a musical to teach a poetry unit. Admitedly, I had reservations at the outset, since I have found that musicals are not always popular with students. As soon as the music starts, I sometimes hear, "Oh no, not again," and many students slide down in their seats or put their heads on their desks. So more than having reservations, I anticipated outright disaster. I was pleasantly surprised at the positive reaction of my students.

I selected *The Music Man* as the musical for my students to study. Before students viewed the video, we went over less familiar vocabulary terms. Without some advance explanation, students might lose interest because they do not understand the terms or the humor involved.

In advance of viewing *The Music Man* video, we talked about how important the words of the songs were to the story line. Our school choir director furnished copies of several songs in the film. I displayed trans-

parencies of some of the lyrics, including some that are nonsensical in nature. With the words before the students, we were able to discuss the songs. I asked them to imagine what the scene for a particular song might be, based on the words used. We discussed rhythm and how the rhythm as well as the lyrics could be important to a particular scene. We talked about the conversations between characters and about how a love scene could be more impressive in song.

Our band director sent some of his students to our classroom to demonstrate their musical instruments. These students took on the role of teacher for a few minutes, explaining how their instruments worked and playing some of the songs from the musical.

My students related to this approach quite well. Most admitted that at one time or another they had written a poem to a girlfriend or boyfriend. Poems, they agreed, could be set to music. They saw how many of the songs that we studied from the video were actually poems, a fact that they had not thought about before. They brought in lyrics to some of their favorite songs for class discussions and were often surprised to discover that they had been singing poetry without realizing it. They saw that songs could be another way of expressing feelings.

My students were now ready to watch the video of *The Music Man.* Never once did I hear the familiar "Oh no, not again." They listened and watched with interest. They tapped their feet or pencils, and occasionally they sang along. When the video ended and the two-week unit was finished, several students said, "That was fun. Let's do another one."

*Bunny Steele, Alief Elsik High School, Alief, Texas*

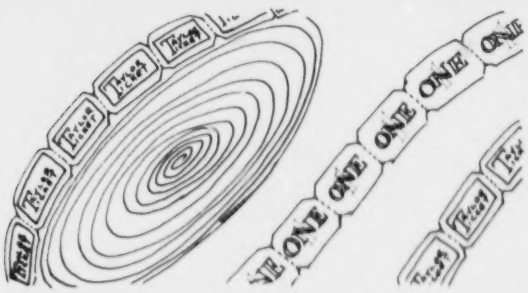
**Tickets! Tickets, Please!**

I sat at my desk staring out the window, trying to find the elusive answer to the ancient question of all dedicated teachers: "How do I get more participation from my class?" No matter how lively, witty, and fun the class discussions, day after day the same students dominated the discussion while others tried desperately to blend into the beige walls of the classroom.

I continued to hear the battle cry of many teachers: "Give participation grades." I had always avoided that approach since the students who talked a lot, but who did not necessarily give good input, got A's, while the more reticent suffered. Out of this frustration came the invention of

Taylor Tickets and Taylor Tolls as a way to reward students for any type of positive input.

The next day, as my students strolled in and took their seats, I announced the beginning of participation grades. I heard the expected moans and groans, even wails from the shy students. I explained that every time students gave the class any type of "positive energy," they would receive a Taylor Ticket. Any attempt to answer a question, to give an opinion, to add extra information, or to volunteer earned Taylor Tickets.




On the contrary, students who gave "negative energy" to the class would receive a Taylor Toll. These were to be given only for major disturbances, not minor annoyances. A Taylor Toll could only be erased by stapling two Taylor Tickets to it.

To my relief, the system was a huge success and caused little extra work. For the Taylor Tickets I simply drew little three-inch by two-inch boxes on an 8-1/2 by 11-inch sheet of typing paper and stamped each box with an encouraging label. Mine said SUPER. I drew spaces in each box for the student's name, my initials, and the date received. Taylor Tolls were stamped with an encouraging phrase, like YOU CAN DO IT or TRY AGAIN, and contained spaces for the student's name, the date, and the reason given out. They also had an additional column for my initials and the student's initials; this column could be detached and kept until time for grading. I ran off copies of these two sheets on colored paper and cut out the individual tickets and tolls.

As my class pursued various activities assigned each day, I walked around the room giving out tickets. Those working as directed on revising papers, giving input to discussions, or working in groups received Taylor Tickets. Once students discovered that it was not impossible to earn tickets and that all they had to do was try, everyone wanted to participate.

The last five minutes of each class session were reserved for signing tickets. Two days prior to grading, students were asked to bring in all the

tickets that they had earned. It took two tickets to void each toll, so students learned that lack of participation was counterproductive. I kept a tally of how many tickets could be earned per day in class. The students' grades were based on this figure. Most students earned over a hundred tickets. After collecting this set of tickets and determining the participation grades, we repeated the procedure with another color of paper.

Surprised at the change in my class, I relished the increased energy, interest, and on-task behavior. It further amazed me how much interest my fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students took in this system. Initially I had feared that they might be "too old" for such a procedure. We all know the importance of rewards for appropriate behavior in the lower levels, but in high school we often overlook how rewarding something like a little slip of colored paper can be. It is a tangible reward for a job well done.

This system made my life so much easier, took subjectivity out of grading, and was a success with my class. Participation and grades went up, as did enthusiasm. Every semester the number-one question from my new classes is, "Are we going to do Taylor Tickets? Please!"

*Vanessa Taylor, Del Valle High School, Del Valle, Texas*

**Transition Workshop**

When students work on revising their papers, they sometimes treat each sentence individually, without considering the transitions between sentences and between paragraphs. To help students work on their transitional words and phrases, I ask them to bring to class a draft of a paper in progress or a paper submitted for a grade earlier in the term.

As homework or at the beginning of the class period, I ask students to copy the first and last sentences of each paragraph on a separate piece of paper, double-spacing the sentences so that they will have room to revise.

In class, I ask one student to write on the chalkboard the first and last sentences of his or her first three paragraphs. (That's all that we will have time to discuss in a fifty-minute class period.) I choose a student who generally writes thoughtful papers and who can talk about his or her ideas relatively well. I also select someone who is comfortable being the center of attention for the class period. You could also choose a paper anonymously and write the sample sentences on the board before class, but I have had greater success working with someone in the classroom—

someone who can say, "Yes, that's what I was getting at" or "No, that's way off." Revising an anonymous paper can be less effective in helping students learn to express their intentions more precisely.

Explain to students that the sentences on the board should give a fairly accurate content outline of the beginning of the paper. Ask students to predict the content of each paragraph based on the transitions. How do the paragraphs relate to one another and to the main idea of the paper? Any problems will be obvious immediately.

After we discuss the existing transitions, we work together to suggest revisions. Are there other words and phrases that will better link the ideas or the actions described? Students are to consider conciseness as well as precision as they revise. Give the writer a chance to propose revisions, too.

Once students have worked together on revising the transitions in the sample paper, ask them to revise the transitions in the papers that they have brought to class, working individually or collaboratively.

As a follow-up activity, students write a journal or notebook entry, either in class or as homework, in which they describe what they have learned about writing transitions.

*Elizabeth Albert, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland*

**Student Assessment of Writing Portfolios**

As the school year comes to a close, the following activity provides a way for students to demonstrate that they have internalized and applied criteria for evaluating their own writing.

Students spend finals week reading through their cumulative portfolios of writing done in junior and senior high. My students are seniors, so they have six years of writing samples to peruse. I ask them to look for examples of good and bad writing. They use a marker to highlight specific passages.

Next, students write a final self-evaluation of their writing, demonstrating what they have learned about good writing over the last six years. They discuss where improvements have been made and where problems still persist. I ask them to employ such terms as *voice, coherence, focus,* and *control,* and to provide specific examples from their own writing portfolios to demonstrate what they know about good writing.

The highlighted papers from the student portfolios are placed in a manila folder with the final self-assessment on top as a final submission. I grade their self-assessments as a final portfolio grade, but I know that the benefits of the assignment are more wide-ranging. Students have had the opportunity to see the growth and maturation in their writing abilities that have inevitably occurred over the past six years: expanded vocabulary, more complex sentence structure, greater insights into literary works, better developed arguments, more fully drawn characters, and better use of detail. As students review their portfolios and witness these changes, their confidence in their writing skills increases.

*Ellen Geisler, Mentor High School, Mentor, Ohio*

**Memory Maps**

The source of this activity has faded into the mists of history. I probably obtained it at a workshop sometime in the past, but I still find it a successful way to encourage students to search their memories with a purpose. The idea is nicely adaptable to different age and ability levels and to available classroom time.

Ask each student to draw an architectural blueprint of a childhood home, either a current or previous residence. Houses, apartments, farms, trailers, or even palaces will work. The diagram should take up about half a page.

Next, students are to indicate certain places on their drawings. Many variations are possible here. You can select particular places that relate to the theme of a work of literature currently under study, to school situations, or to upcoming composition topics. You might ask students to indicate a place where they

did something good without reward
learned how much they were appreciated
first broke a major family rule

or where they

realized how strong they were
discovered a trait that they did not like
did something creative

The list of possibilities is endless.

Students then freewrite about each designated place as a way to remember the idea. A classroom discussion might follow, or students might be asked to choose one of the designated places and write about it. Here again, adapt the activity to fit your needs, depending on whether the goal is to recall an emotional moment, to describe a favorite room, to consider family relationships, and so on.

*Susan J. Lagsdin, Columbia River High School, Vancouver, Washington*

**Self-Portraits and Descriptions**

Try this as a get-acquainted writing activity, or use it any time that you want students to do writing that probes themselves or others. You will find it a lively exercise that stimulates students to think both critically and creatively. I have adapted the activity from writer-in-residence Jean Rukkila.

Show the class several examples of self-portraits of artists or others that you have collected from such magazines as *The New Yorker.* Ask students to discuss why these people have portrayed themselves as they did.

Distribute copies of a variety of self-portraits, or let students select the portraits that interest them. Ask them to freewrite about why the person in the portrait is pictured as she or he is.

Next, ask students to imagine that they are one of these particular artists and to write a paragraph describing themselves and their lives. They are to include any details that they feel are appropriate. They may wish to address the following questions:

What kind of room do you live in?
What kind of vehicle do you drive?
What do you eat?
What is in your closets?
What do you do on Saturday mornings?
What is your biggest fear? Your biggest delight?

When the descriptions are completed, post the magazine portraits on the board and ask for volunteers to read their paragraphs aloud, without identifying the appropriate self-portrait. Can students guess which artist is speaking?

A number of follow-up activities might be used:

1. Students draw or paint a self-portrait or prepare a collage portrait. They then write a paragraph of self-description.
2. Ask students to create a character by drawing a portrait and then writing the descriptive paragraph. This could be a springboard into other types of writing, such as short stories, personal poems, dialogues, monologues, and letters.
3. Students select a particular literary character. Then they create a portrait (or collage) and write a descriptive paragraph. They might select a character from a work read in class or from independent reading. This assignment offers an interesting alternative to a book report, or it could serve as a final project for a novel, play, or short story unit. The portraits and descriptions could be displayed on the bulletin board, and students could compare the different perceptions of the same character.
4. Self-portraits and descriptions can introduce students to one another at the beginning of the year or term. The portraits and descriptions might be revised, finalized, and made into a class booklet or a display for the bulletin board.

*Shirley Kasper, Central Arizona College, Coolidge, Arizona*

**Keeping a Music Journal**

The music journal strategy that I use with my students fulfills three instructional objectives. It provides daily practice for students to gain fluency through spontaneous writing, it provides experience in music appreciation, and it quiets students down so that I can take roll and gather my wits.

Students are directed to use a spiral notebook, much like a stenographer's pad, as a music journal and to bring the journal to class each day along with the other required items. The journal must be kept separate from other class materials, such as a writing folder, class notes, and assignment page.

At the beginning of the class period, students write spontaneously in their journals while they are listening to a particular piece of classical music that I have selected. I give one of three sets of directions to students:

1. Students write anything that comes to mind.
2. Students write anything that comes to mind on a particular topic that I designate, according to the music selection of the day.
3. Students write a story (or paragraph or description) using a provocative first sentence that I select, according to the music selection.

The music plays while the students write in their journals. Between five and ten minutes is an adequate time for their entries. These entries can then be used as prewriting activities for longer, more formal writing activities, such as poems, short stories, descriptions, or arguments.

What follows is a list of some classical music selections, together with topics and beginning sentences that I have found effective:

| *Composer* | *Selection* | *Topic* | *Beginning Sentence* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Berlioz | Dream of the Witches' Sabbath | The chase | I ran as fast as I could, but the strange coach with its weirdly shaped inhabitants followed. |
| Gershwin | Rhapsody in Blue | The twenties | The time machine moved me more than sixty years back in time. There I was in the middle of a big city in 1925. |
| Ravel | Bolero | The apparition | It suddenly appeared, first only as a small cloud of distant dust. |
| Saint-Saëns | Danse Macabre | Halloween | Dark vapors appeared in the twilight sky. |

Given the constraints of the overburdened language arts curriculum, the music journal might be used once or twice a week rather than every day, as I use the activity. It continues to be an effective strategy in my classroom. I am continually amazed at the freshness and originality of language and perceptions that music can draw from students, in particular from reluctant and apprehensive writers.

*Dan Donlan, University of California, Riverside, California*

**Island Isolation**

The beginning of any school year is tense. Students don't know teachers; teachers don't know students. An icebreaker I've used with my sophomores as a means of introduction is one I adapted from a local public radio program called "Desert Island Discs."

On the first day of school, I give students a handout entitled "Island Isolation" and explain their situation: each will be spending a year alone on an uninhabited island. Because they are imaginative, they will have no trouble surviving. By some unexplained wonder, however, they will be allowed to take several nonessential items with them: two recorded music singles, two magazines, two books, and one other nonessential item of their choice. I explain that, again miraculously, they will have at hand any electronic equipment they need. (Practical students always ask.)

Students are to decide what they will take with them and why they want those particular items. By Friday of that week, they should be prepared to share their choices with the class. I usually model an oral presentation the day before student presentations.

This activity tends to relax the students and also gives me a sense of who my students are. (One student took a Boy Scout manual because it listed survival techniques; another took *War and Peace* because "a year might be enough time to finish reading it.")

Since I jot down notes as students speak out, I can often use something from those notes as a prompt when a student is suffering from writer's block later in the year.

"Island Isolation" has provided my students and me with an enjoyable and informative way to start the year.

*Marilyn R. Jennerjohn, Spring Grove Area High School, Spring Grove, Pennsylvania*

**A Relaxed Approach to Public Speaking**

Here's a relaxed but effective way for students to get a taste of public speaking. Students scan newspapers for news on a specific topic, take notes on the main points and any details they want to share, and pass this information on to their classmates in an informal talk.

Besides heightening awareness of world events and providing practice in selecting important points from a passage, this method promotes

confidence by keeping talks short and giving students the clear purpose of sharing information.

Teachers who hoard their back issues of the daily newspaper will find it an especially easy assignment to prepare, as it requires several months' worth of papers.

First, assemble the following:

- three to six months' worth of daily newspapers
- newsmagazines (optional)
- a list of topics, such as country names; the names of people likely to be in the news (world leaders, government figures, etc.); and particular issues (political, ecological, economic, etc.);
- strips of paper with one topic written on each

Also helpful is a worksheet containing several simple questions to help students find the pertinent facts of the story. Possible questions might include:

- What information do you find in the first paragraph of the story?
- Who are the main individuals or groups involved in this story?
- What regions, cities, or countries are referred to in the story?
- What is the main incident, issue, or conflict described in the story?
- What is the time period covered in the story?
- What causes or reasons are given for the incident or conflict described in the story?
- Is this an event or issue that might be viewed differently by different people? If so, how would you describe the different "sides" to this story?

Explain to students that they will be searching for information on specific news topics and will be asked to talk to the class for two to three minutes about what they learn.

Spread the newspapers on desks and tables around the classroom. Place the "topic" strips in a container and let each student choose one. (Students who pick topics that don't interest them may be allowed to choose again.) Ask students to repeat their topics aloud so that you can list them on the chalkboard.

Next, each student scans the newspapers for news about the selected topic, preferably major stories (at least five or six inches in column length). Students are welcome to pass along information as they scan the

newspapers. Tell students that if, after thirty minutes, they have been unable to find any information on their topic, they may choose another.

Each time a student finds a story, he or she reads it and takes notes, including the name and date of the source, on the worksheet provided. Allow two class periods for the process of searching and notetaking.

In class, review speaking skills such as making eye contact, underlining and referring to key words in notes, and projecting one's voice. Assign students to practice their speeches as homework. Advise students to time themselves and to trim their material down to the most important and interesting facts to keep their talk within the time limit.

During the speeches, students in the audience may jot down questions to ask the speakers afterwards. To provide an ongoing involvement in current events, students could also be asked to keep an eye on news of their topic throughout the year and to give quick updates to the class periodically.

*Louanna B. Watt, St. John's School, Tamuning, Guam*

# 2 Literature

Promoting our students' involvement with literature and their appreciation of it is one of our priorities as English teachers. In making reading assignments and devising follow-up activities, we aim to encourage students to enjoy literature, to respond to what they read, and to make reading an important activity in their lives. The activities that follow emphasize the students' participation in the reading and meaning-making process. Included are teaching strategies in which students pose questions about a reading assignment for their classmates to answer, look at how values shape both a character's actions and our own lives, and borrow techniques from favorite authors of their childhood when writing their own stories for young readers.

### Making a Modest Proposal

Before my seniors read Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," we discuss the concept of using irony to effect satire so that they are aware of Swift's approach. After our class discussion of Swift's essay, students brainstorm a list of contemporary issues that interest them, such as overcrowded prisons, abortion, the homeless, and censorship.

Students form small groups according to which topics from the list interest them most. Then, using "A Modest Proposal" for a model, they propose solutions to their group's topic. One person from each group reads the proposals aloud, and the class discusses the proposals, selecting the most effective one.

*Linda Patterson, Kirby High School, Memphis, Tennessee*

### Literary Posters

"How do you like it?" Juan asked anxiously as he showed me his carefully lettered poster. "It is the beating of his hideous heart." While

he looked proud of his effort, we both knew that some of the credit belonged to Edgar Allen Poe. Still, the poster was Juan's.

The literary poster is a classroom project designed to motivate students to enjoy the formal language of core literature, which they initially find so difficult.

Students might work individually or in small groups. Assign each student or group of students different pages from a literary work. Then ask them to read their selections and locate sentences that convey a particular aspect of the literary work. For example, to study mood in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," my students select Poe's scariest sentences. To study setting in Jack London's *Call of the Wild,* they choose particularly descriptive sentences. Each student writes his or her particular sentence on a sheet of newsprint to make a poster. We display all the posters around the room and are literally surrounded by good literature.

Next, students make use of the sentences on the posters to write found poems. Using the Poe posters, my students have written poems entitled "Horror" to capture Poe's mood. One student was justly proud of his effort in editing the words of Poe to create the following poem:

> I heard a slight groan of mortal terror.
> My blood ran cold.
> Death was approaching.
> I cut off the arms and
> Just as I had done,
> They were making a mockery of my horror.

By creating the literary posters and the accompanying poetry, students also gain an appreciation of Poe's style. When I ask students to compare the original version of the story with an abridged and simplified adaptation, they are incensed and insulted that "their" lines have been altered or eliminated. As one student commented, "I don't understand those big words, but when Poe uses them, I do." Their posters had changed their attitudes.

To analyze London's descriptive style, some of my students color-code their posters to show imagery appealing to sight (blue), sound (green), smell (purple), and touch (black). Then they write a variation of the found poem with the following format: "The Yukon summer looks like . . ., sounds like . . ., smells like . . ., and feels like. . . ." Others write

haiku under the heading "Teaching Jack London to Write Haiku" and soon realize that he was a master of descriptive writing. One student wrote this haiku:

> Midnight sun casting
> Eternal shadows upon
> The silent mountains.

Once again, the literary posters and companion poems allow my students to take control and "own" the formal English.

While all of my students have enjoyed making the literary posters and the found poems, the most exciting result of the project has been to give my slower readers a way to grasp and understand, and enjoy, our core literature.

I realized students' developing sense of ownership over the language when I moved one student's poster. "Where is *my* sentence?" he asked. He'd signed his name to it, too.

*Penelope Bryant Turk, El Capitan High School, Lakeside, California*

**A Novel Approach to Movies**

Students become weary of writing book reports or critical essays on novels that they have read independently. The following is an interesting alternative that will work with students in middle school, junior high, and senior high. I use the activity after reading, viewing, and critiquing a novel and movie in the classroom, and after we have discussed the suitability of the actors playing the roles and the movie's presentation of the different scenes or settings from the novel.

Here is the assignment that I give to students:

> While reading your novel, imagine that you are a movie director who will be casting actors to play the major characters from the novel and who must interpret the way in which the script will be acted and filmed. You will present these ideas to the class in a talk lasting five to seven minutes. Your presentation must include the following two activities:
>
> 1. Analyze the major characters based on their looks and their personalities; then cast real actors to play these roles. You may base your decision on an actor's looks and manner-

isms, previous roles that he or she has played, or both. You are to explain your decision to the class with an emphasis on *why* you chose these actors for these roles. The discussion must reflect your knowledge of the main characters' personalities and looks.

2. Make a poster to reflect the three to five most important scenes from the novel. You may either illustrate the poster or cut pictures out of a magazine. Explain why these scenes are the most important from the novel by explaining the important aspects of the plot as they relate to the scenes.

Your presentation will be graded on your knowledge of the characters and *why* you chose those actors to play those roles; the scenes you chose and *why* those are the most important scenes from the novel; your speaking ability, including eye contact, body movement, and voice projection and expression; and the length of your presentation.

*Mary Lee McCoy, Assumption High School, Louisville, Kentucky*

**Inner-Outer Circle Discussion**

Middle-school students need to practice asking questions and justifying answers using critical thinking skills. The inner-outer circle is a student-centered activity that helps develop productive questioning and discussion. I use the activity in our study of *Johnny Tremain,* but it would work with most assigned reading.

After students read *Johnny Tremain,* they formulate questions in five categories involving critical thinking skills:

Cause-and-effect questions: What did it mean when . . . ?

Clarification questions: Why did he or she do that?

Multiple-causes questions: What else might have caused it?

Empathy and transfer questions: What if you put yourself in _____'s place?

Alternative-action questions: What could be done to change the situation?

All students write down two questions in each category. Then I explain the procedure that the class will follow the next day during the question-

ing. At all times politeness is required, which means no interruptions and no impolite talk. The students divide into two groups. Those in the outer circle are responsible for asking questions only. The other half of the students are inner-circle members, who will answer questions only. Halfway through the period, the role of questioning and responding will be reversed. I also explain my evaluation system and give each student an evaluation sheet.

The next day we move the desks quietly into two circles, with the inner-circle "responders" facing each other and the outer-circle "questioners" arranged outside them.

I ask for a volunteer from the outer circle to ask a question. Any member of the inner circle can answer the question. When the responding student has finished speaking, anyone else in the inner circle can clarify what has been said, add information, or disagree politely. No hands are raised; as teacher, I do not interrupt. The activity is self-directed by the students.

If an outer-circle participant wishes to comment, this student has to phrase the response in question form. Thus, the format is set. The outer circle can only ask questions, and the inner circle can only respond. Halfway through the class period, we switch roles.

This discussion technique has produced several strong results. First, the questions and answers involve critical thinking skills. Second, the inner-circle participants learn to justify opinions by backing them up with facts from the novel. A by-product for all students is the understanding that they must be polite and that there is a certain give-and-take in a group discussion. My class enjoyed the exercise, and one student commented, "I got an A for doing something I like—talking!"

*K. Elaine Mies, Bryan Independent School District, Bryan, Texas*

**Value Auction**

To start my seniors thinking about what's important to them and why, I hold a value auction before they read *Anthem* by Ayn Rand. First I hand out the following list:

To live forever
Equal opportunity for all
A world of peace and understanding

To live with five favorite people in paradise
To be free forever
Economic security
Career satisfaction
To win the lottery
Self-respect
Complete wisdom
A playboy/playgirl lifestyle
Ability to see into the future
A perfect looking body
Achieve full potential
To be a member of a hot rock group

I ask students to read the list and to add any values or beliefs that they think should be included. Each year the list changes. We also discuss what *value* means. Then I tell the class that an auction will be held in a few minutes and that each student will have $1,000 to bid on any of the items on the list. I also tell students that if they do not bid on any items, then they forfeit the opportunity to experience those values during their lifetime.

Students enjoy bidding on those values that are important to them. Afterward I ask them to write in their journals about how they feel their lives would be with (or without) the values that were just auctioned off. Students share their journal entries the following day, which leads to a class discussion of how values shape our lives. At this point students are prepared for the totalitarian world that Ayn Rand describes in *Anthem*.

*Beverly Lewis, Somers High School, Lincolndale, New York*

**Author/Artist Exchange**

For several years my sophomores have taken a few days to return to their roots and immerse themselves in childhood. It begins with a discussion of the implications that a specific audience may have for readers and writers. We review the dramatic reading techniques that are appropriate for reading to young children. Students then take a risk and read their favorite children's book to the class. Next we evalu-

ate the various components of these works of literature that made them so memorable for the students. By this time we have established working criteria for dramatic reading and also for writing our own children's literature.

The next phase is fun. The artwork that we commissioned from a nearby third-grade class arrives, and my students eagerly sign up for two, three, or sometimes four stories to write from the drawings.

We laminate the pictures that students select as the covers for their books. Drafts and practice readings follow. We discuss several layouts and possible additional pictures. We read our completed stories aloud and practice our dramatic techniques. Sometimes these readings are filmed and further discussed. We assemble the books together, trying various binding methods. Then we are ready for a live audience.

We arrive at the third-grade classroom, where my authors are greeted with some awe and nervousness. Within minutes all awkwardness disappears as teens and kids match up and sit on the floor reading the stories to each other. Often the hero of the story coincidentally has the same name as the young artist, a fact that causes some books to be carried around for days by the artists. The books are exchanged between pairs of teens and kids, and later the books will become part of the third-grade classroom library. The food and beverages that we have brought along are consumed. Impromptu room tours are conducted while taped interviews record the reactions of the artists and authors. Self-esteem is enhanced for all students as they look with pride on the books that they have produced. We reluctantly leave our past and return to the reality of high school.

*Carol Deurloo, Chippewa Hills High School, Remus, Michigan*

**The Proverbial Book Report**

This idea works for written or oral commentary on short stories, novels, and biographies. Distribute a list of proverbs to the class and discuss what they mean. Students then select two or three proverbs that "fit" their characters' decisions during the course of the work. At major turning points, did the character follow or ignore the proverb? Why? With what result?

The list below has been sufficient to provide a match with many of the characters that my students have read about. You can also use this list

to write or talk about the characters in a book that the entire class has read.

The more you have, the more you want.
Where there's a will, there's a way.
Opportunity seldom knocks twice.
Misfortunes never come singly.
Look before you leap.
The leopard can't change its spots.
All that glitters is not gold.
While the cat's away, the mice will play.
Don't put all your eggs in one basket.
If there were no clouds, we should not enjoy the sun.
Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.
The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.
You've made your bed; now lie in it.
It's no use crying over spilt milk.
The early bird catches the worm.
A stitch in time saves nine.

*Donna Jean Bisbee, Clairemont High School, San Diego, California*

**The Final Frontier**

In an effort to expose students to a variety of literary genres, and to tap readers' interest in comic books, teachers may use science fiction and/or fantasy as a unit of study. I have chosen to address these two distinct forms in one unit, because they share the important element of a created environment that supports characters and plot.

To begin this unit, I show a taped episode of *Star Trek*, or a science fiction movie such as *The Last Starfighter.* I ask students to map out the elements of the story—the beginning (who, what, where), the problem/goal, the sequence of events, and the ending/solution. We relate specialized vocabulary to the story map.

Next I introduce a variety of science fiction and fantasy texts to the class. I invite students to bring in examples of their favorite science fiction or fantasy stories/novels as well. *Nebula Awards* and *Orbit* annual

publications of outstanding science fiction pieces are good sources for short, read-aloud pieces, as is *Science Fiction Magazine.* Using text sets of science fiction and/or fantasy novels, I allow students each to select a novel that interests them.

Students read daily and meet in groups to discuss their novels. I guide discussions with general questions such as: What was the best part of today's reading? What new things have we learned about characters? How has the environment supported characters? Students may be required to keep notes on the different elements of the story. Groups can compile information on butcher paper as a reference for others.

During reading and after completing novels, I encourage students to list characteristics and make generalizations about science fiction and fantasy. I use student-generated ideas to compare and contrast science fiction to fantasy, and help students to categorize other appropriate novels, comic books, and movies as either science fiction or fantasy. Students can also share excerpts from their reading with the whole class.

Finally, I invite students to create an original product of science fiction or fantasy. Since writers of science fiction and fantasy develop extensive worlds for their novels, students are asked to create a detailed environment and inhabitants consistent with that environment.

Creating a culture for the civilization can be a challenging activity. I encourage students to be creative in the medium they choose for presentation. Some possibilities are: mural, diorama, visitor's guide, taped interview, and film.

The purpose is for students to have an exciting, positive experience with science fiction and fantasy, while learning the complexity of creating such work. To my students, I say, "Have fun, and may the force be with you!"

*Julie C. Harris, Houston, Texas*

**Daily Life Then and Now**

The following visual organizer was created by Stuart Omans, Kathleen Bartlett, and me to help students compare life in medieval times with the present. My sophomores work in groups of three to answer questions about contemporary life, the dreamlike life portrayed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and the daily life depicted in *Romeo and Juliet.* Students

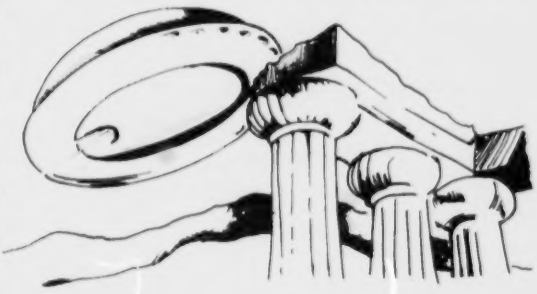
then use the information that they have gathered to write an essay comparing and contrasting the different lifestyles.

| | Today | In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* | In *Romeo and Juliet* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Where do young people meet? | | | |
| How do young people choose whom they will marry? | | | |
| Who raises the children? | | | |
| How do young people settle their differences? | | | |
| What is the punishment for fighting? | | | |
| What weapons are used? | | | |
| What kind of permission is required for marriage? | | | |
| How old are young people when they marry? | | | |
| Where and by whom are marriages performed? | | | |
| Describe what clothing people wear. | | | |
| Who can read and write? | | | |
| Who is in charge of the cities? | | | |
| How important is a person's name? | | | |

*Sharon Johnston, Evans High School, Orlando, Florida*

**Another Time, Another Place**

Marc Antony gathers a crowd on the steps of the White House. Julius Caesar rides triumphantly through Rome in a shiny space craft. The armies of Octavius and Antony meet the armies of Brutus and Cassius on the fields of Vietnam.



As strange as they sound, these are all scenes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as "recreated" by my students. These scenes are the product of a very successful, student-generated activity, which students can pursue either individually or in groups.

This activity helps students overcome some of their preconceptions about reading Shakespeare, and helps me approach the play with renewed energy.

First, students select a time period with an environment and dialect that appeal to them. The chosen period may come from the past, the present, or, for especially daring students, even the future. Choices in my class have included the Civil War South, the 1960s, the Harlem Renaissance, the 1990s, and Rome in the year 2020. I encourage students, in their brainstorming, to remember novels and stories they have read that incorporate the flavor and dialect of a certain period (such as *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Young Goodman Brown, Uncle Tom's Cabin,* etc.).

Students then choose (or are assigned) a scene from *Julius Caesar* that could be adapted to another era. They are to detail the staging, the setting, and the costuming in the scene, in addition to translating the text into the correct dialect for the period. Students' adaptations are to be written up in proper dramatic format.

Despite the challenges presented by this activity, all students quickly become absorbed in creating the scene. During the process they are given an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the text, to use drama terminology, and to explore aspects of language and culture while

drawing from prior reading experience. If used as a group project, the activity provides an excellent setting for cooperative learning and the exchange of ideas.

Though some "dyed-in-the-wool" Shakespeare lovers may find this exercise irreverent, I think Shakespeare himself would enjoy the language play and creative excitement generated by this activity.

*Patricia Dalene Greening Coleman, Alief Elsik High School, Houston, Texas*

**There's More Than One Way to Solve a Problem**

Teen suicide seems to have become, in the eyes of some students, an "easy out," the inevitable result of the mounting pressures in their day-to-day lives. This message of limited options and hope is even conveyed in some classic literature, particularly the tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet.* Because of Shakespeare's mastery in depicting Romeo's and Juliet's suicides as romantic and fateful, I knew if I were to teach *Romeo and Juliet,* I would need a supplement to my curriculum.

I decided to modify the problem-solving model and apply it to *Romeo and Juliet.* Sometimes a problem does not seem solvable because it is too large or complicated a problem. In step 1 of this model, we explore the entire problem by listing many underlying problems or subproblems. In step 2, we determine which of the many underlying problems listed should be solved, while in step 3, we create many varied solutions for the problem.

In each act, the students list the problem or problems that Romeo and Juliet thought they had and how they, together or individually, chose to solve them. For example, in Act I, Romeo was deeply involved in mourning his unrequited love for Rosaline. He chose to solve his problem by going to the Capulet feast to gaze upon Rosaline. In Act V, he learned of Juliet's death and determined to kill himself that very day by using poison.

Next, the students use divergent thinking to come up with six or seven additional solutions to the character's problems. In Act I, Romeo might have dealt with his feelings for Rosaline by taking up a new hobby, going out of town, or even writing Rosaline a note or a poem. In Act V, Romeo could have decided to wait for some time before making a decision, or to consult with Friar Laurence, his friends, or members of his family.

Finally, students work through the entire six-step, problem-solving model, exploring for themselves the problems they think Romeo and Juliet had. This list might include "impatience" or "immaturity" (problems neither Romeo nor Juliet addresses to any extent). In step 2, students decide to solve the problem that they think would have the greatest impact on Romeo and Juliet. Step 3 involves creating solutions to the problem; step 4 establishes criteria for determining which solution would be best, and finally, the students write the best solution.

After working through the model, students recognize the problems that Romeo and Juliet were dealing with. They also discover many solutions to their lovers' problems that would have avoided the suicides. This curriculum not only proves valuable for analysis of *Romeo and Juliet* but also provides a safe place for discussing teen problems and the tragedy of suicide.

*Mary Ann Payne, Butler Middle School, Salt Lake City, Utah*

**A Controversial Topic**

High school seniors love controversy. Too often, the controversy is limited to school policy or the drinking age. I have prepared a unit for my senior classes around a controversial book, *Go Ask Alice,* which vividly portrays adolescent drug abuse and its consequences. The unit, designed for mature students, promotes two solid weeks of productive discussion and class participation along the following general outline:

*Days 1–2* *Censorship.* We begin by reading "The Day They Came to Arrest the Book," a play (based on a novel by Nat Hentoff [Dell, 1983]) about censorship from *Scholastic Voice* (26 January 1987). A discussion follows in which we debate issues dealing with censorship.

*Day 3* *Grace Slick's song "White Rabbit."* The book title *Go Ask Alice* came from this song, and I use it as a source of speculation for the students. I also prepare them for the sometimes-explicit description in the story by discussing the diary format in which it is written. Students are always allowed to choose an alternative book if they feel uncomfortable

reading *Go Ask Alice.* I often suggest *Carmen,* by John Benton (Benton Publications, 1983), to students interested in an alternative choice, because it, too, deals with drug and alcohol abuse, allowing for common discussion among readers of both books. Students are also free to choose another social problem area among teenagers and to read a novel relating to that issue.

*Days 4–9* *Writing and responding.* During the actual reading of the book, we spend class time in a variety of ways. Students maintain a notebook that remains in the classroom. It is used for daily journal writing, freewriting, vocabulary lists, and writing responses as a way for them to sort their thoughts before class. Using this unit with two sections, I respond to each class's notebooks on alternate days. We also read excerpts aloud. Most discussions are class-generated.

*Day 10* *Talk show.* Students draw roles and personalities from a hat, determining who is a "guest" and who is a member of the "audience." The audience members must prepare three questions or comments to share during the show. The students acting as guests must assume and maintain the role and opinions of the character they have drawn. Some guest roles might include a school counselor, a parent of an addict, an addict, a teacher, a student seeking alternatives to drugs, and a drug dealer. I am the host of the talk show.

*Day 11* *Evaluation and discussion.* The unit evaluation is a personal response to several opinion-related questions dealing with the unit and the story. These responses are then used to generate a final summary discussion. We also discuss the value of the unit and whether it should be used in future classes.

In addition to the activities described above, each student is assigned one street-name drug as mentioned in the story. The student is responsible for researching the drug to find its pharmaceutical name, its origin, its side effects, and the physical effect that it produces. The student gives an informal report to the class on the day that the drug appears in the reading and is responsible for finding and reporting answers to any questions the class may have about the particular drug.

The popularity of the unit is tremendous. The whole atmosphere of the class becomes more open, trusting, and responsible. The seniors appreciate the adult discussion; the new approach to the drug-abuse problem; the variety of speaking, reading, and writing activities; and the fact that I consider them mature enough to read this controversial book.

*Maureen McManus, North High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin*

**Unanswerable Questions**

Most students are reluctant to admit they don't understand something in their reading. This exercise is designed to draw out those problem areas in students' comprehension and provide an opportunity for other students to flex their comprehensive muscles.

I adapted this exercise from strategies learned at Bard College's Writing and Thinking Institute.

First, I ask students to write questions about the text that they would like an answer to but cannot answer themselves. After the questions are written, I ask each student to share one question at a time until all the questions have been heard. If there is a question that can be definitely answered in the text, I prompt other students to help out the questioner. (Caution: See note regarding interpretive questions.) While questions are being read, I encourage other students to jot down any new questions that intrigue them. Next, each student picks one question that he or she would most like answered, and then answers it by observing the following instructions: "First, review the text in light of the question and collect evidence to produce an answer. Come up with evidence for what you *believe* the answer to the question is. Be sure to refer directly to the text in answering your question. Be creative in discovering your answer." At this point, the teacher can choose one of several alternatives. After students have written for a while, for example, ideas can be shared. After students have shared, they can work collaboratively on similar topics, creating a group essay, or they could share ideas in a group and then write essays independently. This strategy is successful because it allows students to be in control of their response to a reading assignment. It fosters critical thinking and provides practice for thesis statements and persuasive essay writing as the students work out their ideas.

**Note:** This strategy works best after the text you are studying has been discussed a little. The object is not to clear up literal questions, because at this point, students should understand the reading somewhat. However, if you tell students they may write only interpretive questions (those that cannot be answered by the "black-and-white" writing in the text), you may never hear a literal question a student still has about the text. Allow students to write any questions, and as these questions are shared, other students will point out where in the text the literal answers are. Remember to discourage any discussion on the interpretive questions during the first sharing of questions.

*Cheryl Bromley Jones, Sandwich High School, Sandwich, Massachusetts*

**Should Have Been Poems**

Internal conflict is common in literature. It appears in the short story, "The Other Wife" by Colette, the novel *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, and the play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams.

My students often had a hard time relating to the internal conflicts of literary characters until I devised "Should Have Been" poems. I borrowed the idea from Christopher Fahy whose poem "The Man I Should Have Been" appeared in the literary magazine *Amelia* in 1985.

I start the assignment by asking students to pick a role they play. They often choose such roles as student, friend, sister, brother, son, daughter, or worker. Students then use this role as the focus of their poems and state it in their titles. For example, I wrote and shared a poem called, "The Teacher I Should Have Been."

Once students have chosen roles and written their titles, we discuss the type of information found in the poems and how it is organized.

"Should Have Been" poems are divided into five stanzas. The first stanza tells how the person looks, the second stanza tells about the person's skills, the third stanza tells what the person says, and the fourth stanza tells about the person's life.

The fifth stanza tells why it's better for people to accept the way they are instead of thinking they should be perfect. It allows students to show why the decisions they've made in their lives are best for them.

The example below shows the general format for "Should Have Been" poems.

**The Piano Student I Should Have Been**

The piano student I should have been has long graceful fingers.
She dresses elegantly and always seems poised, even during recitals.

The piano student I should have been has perfect timing.
She can easily turn a page of sheet music without losing her place.

The piano student I should have been says, "Oh no, I couldn't possibly give up practicing tonight to go out for pizza. Music is my life!"

The piano student I should have been is rich and famous.
She lost count long ago of all the recording contracts she has signed.

The piano student I should have been is trapped in a life of nonstop practice sessions and concert tours.

She wishes now she had lightened up and had what I had: FUN!

I have used this format successfully with students in grades ten through twelve as well as at a teacher in-service.

Students seem to enjoy blowing off steam by writing these poems and I always have plenty of volunteers who want to read their work out loud.

*Jana Turbyfill, Sulphur Springs, Texas*

# 3 Prewriting and Writing

We can stimulate the growth and development of our students' writing through continued writing practice. And the best way to produce accomplished writers is to provide a variety of writing experiences. The teaching strategies in this section are designed to stimulate the flow of words and ideas and to encourage students' involvement in their writing. These ideas promote writing development as students carry on a dialogue in a class journal, correspond with local and national celebrities, relive a past injury, and set a character adrift at the scene of a natural disaster.

**Taking a Position**

In the past, my American literature students have struggled with preparing an effective position paper. I have devised a teaching unit that uses John Steinbeck's short stories and novel *Of Mice and Men,* which students can easily understand and which are full of ideas that can be developed into personal positions.

I start with the short stories. In the past we have read "The Leader of the People," "The White Quail," "The Harness," "Junius Maltby," and "Tularecito"—more some years, fewer other years. Then students read *Of Mice and Men.* During the reading I focus students' attention each day with an initial fast-write on personal struggles that tie into the selection for that day. For example, with "The Harness" I ask students, "What is one of the roles that you have felt forced to play? What were some things that you liked about the role? What were some things that were hard for you or that you didn't like?" While we read *Of Mice and Men* I might ask students, "Write about a time when you took care of a person—someone very young or helpless in some way. What were some things that made you impatient? What were some things that were endearing about that person?"

After we read and discuss each of the selections, students pair up and brainstorm a list of two to four ideas per story about what they think

Steinbeck is saying regarding human behavior. Working individually, students take one idea and discuss how it was demonstrated in the story. Then they explain how this idea is true in "real life" by giving real or hypothesized situations.

In a classroom discussion the following day, I demonstrate a possible position that could be developed from the reading selections. For example, I suggest the position that "You can't count on other people to do what you want them to do." Then we list supporting positions:

Can't count on closest friend

Can't count on teacher

Can't count on parents

Students share some of the ideas that they have developed. We discuss how to make an idea more general if it is already too specific, or vice versa. Then I ask students to rework their ideas and to settle on one position and three supporting positions.

During the next class period, students return to their notes from each of the stories and fill in examples to illustrate each of the supporting position statements. I encourage them to have at least two examples for each supporting position by using some quotations, some paraphrasing, and some simple referrals to the story. Then students write three paragraphs, one for each of the supporting positions. I also put examples of position papers on the overhead projector and ask students to brainstorm the position in each paper and the supporting positions.

At this point the main body of the position paper is completed. As students turn to the introductory paragraph, I encourage them to start generally and work through the paragraph so that the last sentence is their position statement. I remind them not to steal their own thunder by including supporting material in this introductory paragraph.

Then we turn to the concluding paragraph. I suggest that students strengthen their arguments by relating an example from their own lives that supports the general statement made in the introduction. Then they conclude their papers with a rephrasing of their general statement.

Students spend two class periods reading the papers aloud and making suggestions to others for improvement. Then they return to their own position papers, revise and edit the papers, and make a final copy. By the

end of this unit they have gained more confidence in their ability to write position papers, and the improved quality of their papers makes these compositions more interesting for me to read and assess.

*Myra J. Zelensky, Ketchikan High School, Ketchikan, Alaska*

**Armchair Postcards**

Students can exercise their imaginations and their writing skills without leaving the comfort of a favorite chair. All they need are some 3″ × 5″ or 4″ × 6″ index cards, some writing implements, and some old magazines.

I give students the following instructions:

> You and your family are on vacation. Traveling by car across the United States wasn't exactly your idea of a relaxing time (especially with your younger brother and his pet tarantula in the back seat). Your assignment:
>
> 1. Write three postcards to your best friend back home.
> 2. Describe a humorous situation that you have experienced on your trip. (Your goal is to make me laugh—or at least giggle.)
> 3. Neatly fill the entire postcard. A total of 125 words is the minimum for each card.
> 4. Paste or glue a magazine photograph on the front of the card. Be creative in your selection.
> 5. Explain your location to your friend. Use descriptive language.
>
> Be imaginative. What unusual events could happen on your trip?

Here's what one student wrote:

> Dear Colleen,
>
> Greetings from "Bat World" USA (Baja, California). I can't believe that Marvin actually talked Mom & Dad into stopping here—what a tourist trap. If he wanted to see bats, why didn't he look in the woodshed at home? Instead, we had to waste 3 hrs. in a black, frozen, bat-filled museum. Doesn't that sound like your idea of a good time? What's next on Marvin's list of hot spots? . . . A soybean farm?? Dad

and Mom are on my nerves, major Dad has locked the keys in the car twice (once with the engine running) and Mom keeps trying to fix me up with hotel bellboys in polyester pants. Marvin's suitcase flew off the luggage rack while we were cruising through the Redwood Forest. Talk about funny! I wished I had a camera to photograph them as they dodged in and out of traffic peeling his Ninja Turtle underwear off of the highway. More adventures later!!

Your vacationing friend

P.S. Can you believe it! . . . Mom makes us get up at 9:00! Yuckk!

*Denise Lakin, North Tapps Middle School, Sumner, Washington*

**Moving in the Right Direction**

County and state maps can be used as a stimulus for a variety of classroom writing exercises. I have been able to procure such maps at no charge by contacting my county clerk and state legislator. Students use the maps, working either individually or sharing maps, to complete the following assignments.

1. Imagine that you moved to this county (or state) from over a thousand miles away. You have only this map to introduce you to your new home. Based on the map, what would you expect your life to be like? What might you do for recreation? Can you draw any conclusions about the type of industries that you would expect to find? Do the town names give any clues about the ethnic groups in your community or about the region's history?
2. Pick a town and then choose a body of water that is at least eight inches from that town, regardless of the map's scale. Using miles and compass points, give me directions so that I can start out in the town and travel to the body of water. You might want to select a particular park or other point of interest located on this body of water.
3. Write a letter to the producers of the map, suggesting an additional feature to be included or complimenting them on a specific aspect of the map that you think is well done. Are there geographical features or historical places that you feel should be added? As a

newcomer, did you find certain kinds of information on the map particularly helpful?

*Craig A. Akey, Clintonville Senior High, Clintonville, Wisconsin*

**Romantic Short Stories**

The short story has proved to be a popular type of fiction writing for my junior high students. In February, while we are celebrating other aspects of Valentine's Day, my students have the option of writing a romantic short story. Knowing that many may feel uncomfortable writing about romance between human characters, I suggest that they choose as characters inanimate objects that would normally be found together. I might suggest shoes and shoelaces, potato chips and dip, hot dogs and ketchup.

Using a less personal subject frees students to pursue the writing enthusiastically. Students brainstorm for details, work on creating a realistic setting, and even capitalize on the humor inherent in the assignment. They are also concerned with developing character and personality in their objects. Many students do "research" on their main characters in an attempt to make them real to the audience. Our romantic short story assignment quickly becomes a popular project—not only for the writers, but for the audience of the finished products as well.

*Debra R. Harding, School District of Cadott Community, Cadott, Wisconsin*

**Class Pride Folder**

The class pride folder is a simple, but effective, way to promote and encourage good writing. The folder, usually a single manila file folder, is a storage place in the classroom for copies of final drafts of each student's best pieces of writing. Each student, fellow classmates, and the teacher help decide which pieces of writing are to go in the pride folder as the year progresses. By the end of the year, each student should have at least one piece of writing in the pride folder.

The pride folder can help build students' self-esteem. New writing assignments are added to the folder as different types of writing are

covered in class and mastered by students. The folder may be shared with students from other classes, parents, administrators, or other visitors to the class, adding to the feeling of pride that members of the class have about their writing efforts.

If the school has a literary magazine, the class pride folder can serve as a place to collect the best pieces of writing to submit to the magazine. Making copies of the writings and submitting them to the magazine would be an easy task for either students or teacher.

*Ken Spurlock, Covington Independent Schools, Covington, Kentucky*

**Cutting Out Wordiness**

Money seems to be motivational to all of us, and students are no different. This factor is probably why the following activity succeeds in inspiring peer editors to be conscientious in their task of identifying and eliminating wordiness in the writing of others.

To begin the activity, I explain to the class that they will be editing with a partner and that they will have the task of examining the other person's draft for specific instances of wordiness. (By this time we have already discussed wordy phrases, redundancies, intensifiers or hedges, and the use of such expressions as *there is, there are, it is,* and *it was.*) I also explain that I will pay money (not real money, of course) based upon the following rate:

wordy phrases: $1 per word eliminated
redundancy: $1 per word eliminated
intensifiers or hedges: $1 per word removed
*there is, there are:* $5 per revision
*it is, it was:* $5 per revision

Having borrowed the money from my son's Monopoly game, I then circulate as students show me the changes that they suggest, and I pay them the amount of money earned by their editing.

One rule applies before a payoff will be made. Each partner must agree that the removal of the word or phrase or the suggested revision of the sentence produces a stronger sentence without changing the original idea or losing any meaning. Both partners benefit because the editor receives "money," and the writer strengthens the sentences

of his or her draft. Stress to students that there is no value in making changes if the editing does not strengthen the writing. Students can look at and discuss several sample edits, commenting on their merit and suggesting alternatives, such as nonredundant, but useful, additions.

I normally have students change partners several times during the class period so that an editor who has a paper "rich" in wordiness does not have an unfair advantage. I also suggest that when beginning a new paper, the editor goes to a section that has not been read for wordiness, rather than always starting from the beginning, thereby guaranteeing that the entire paper will be edited.

At the end of the class period, an auction is held in which students can use their "money" for bidding. Items auctioned can vary depending upon the interests and age of the students, but could include actual school supplies or snacks or coupons that could be used for extra privileges. The most motivational item that I auction has been a late-paper coupon that allowed a major paper to be handed in one day late with no penalty.

While I originated this activity for a composition class, it can be used at various levels and for various purposes. The teacher simply needs to decide on what types of revisions to pay for, such as usage errors, capitalization, punctuation, and misspellings. As long as students have the background knowledge to make these revisions, this editing approach will provide the motivation.

*Margie A. Yeager, Connersville High School, Connersville, Indiana*

**Wall of Heroes**

"Writing letters is boring! I can't do it!" bellowed from the mouths of my English class during the introductory lesson of formal letter writing. With such negative responses, how could I get my class interested in writing letters and thank-you notes?

I knew that my students had worked well with concrete, positive reinforcements in the past, and I also knew that they were at an age where they began looking up to others when deciding the kind of person they were becoming. Teen and sports magazines always centered around celebrities. So I devised a way to combine these two ideas and to make writing letters less of a chore.

First, I asked students to name some famous people whom they admired—actors, athletes, politicians, local celebrities, and so on. We discussed the different qualities of these people and narrowed the list to people who represented positive influences for us and from whom we could learn. Some of the names that my class came up with were David Robinson, Travis Tritt, Connie Chung, George Bush, and Hammer.

Then I asked students to write a formal letter to as many of these celebrity figures as they wanted, explaining their admiration to each person. As a class, we constructed a shell letter that the students could use and personalize. In this letter they requested a picture for the Wall of Heroes in our classroom. We made sure to write to some local "Heroes" so that we would be sure to receive a few responses.

To obtain the addresses for these celebrities, we enlisted our local librarian. With her help we got addresses from teen magazines, newspapers, sports magazines, and special reference books.

Shortly after mailing our letters, the responses started coming in, and as they arrived we mounted the pictures on our Wall of Heroes. Students wrote thank-you notes for each picture and response letter that they received.

Through this project, the students learned to write formal letters and thank-you notes without it being a chore. In fact, they enjoyed the lesson. As soon as the responses started arriving, the students wanted to send out even more letters.

When we took down our Wall of Heroes, each person who wrote to a celebrity received that celebrity's picture as a concrete, positive reinforcement for completing the assignment.

*Cindy Korn, Pease Middle School, San Antonio, Texas*

### Memory Chain

This prewriting idea comes from the Missouri Association of Teachers of English. It helps students remember and assemble details about an important person in their past. Students are given a handout that poses the following questions:

1. Think of a person important to you in your past. The person may be living or dead, a relative or friend.
2. Write the person's name on your paper.

3. When you think of this person, where do you picture him or her? Write down the exact place. What is at least one important physical characteristic of this person?
4. What specific objects or people or scenery do you picture with this person?
5. What colors do you associate with this person?
6. What sounds, either nearby or far-off, do you recall hearing when you think of this person?
7. Do you associate any smells, odors, or fragrances with this person?
8. Were you two alone, or were there others present? Who?
9. What was going on or what were you doing?
10. What does this person say? Write down the exact words, using quotation marks.
11. What do you say?
12. What do you remember feeling?
13. As you look back, what is the dominant impression you have of this person?
14. In retrospect, what does this person or time mean to you now?

Once students have answered these questions, ask them to look over their notes and to add any other impressions that they have about the person. With their memories thus stimulated, students are ready to write a descriptive essay about that important person.

*Diana Bundy, Grandview High School, Grandview, Missouri*

**Doing Away with Grades**

Students in my English classes are now eager to revise their compositions—even repeatedly. This drastic change in attitude about the revision process is, I must admit, grade oriented: students no longer receive grades for their essays.

After ten years of teaching writing as a process and carefully taking students through the prewriting, writing, and revising stages, I realized that although I articulated a belief in the writing process, I asked my students for products. By removing definite due dates and absolute grades for assignments, I now provide students with the opportunity to revise each paper a number of times.

This nongrading procedure and the companion workshop approach to writing is fairly simple to explain and establish in any class. After a writing assignment is made, the class takes a few minutes to discuss the possible topics, audience, and strategies for the paper. This prewriting is either a whole-class, small-group, or individual activity. Students work in class on the assignment, but they are also expected to work outside of class.

At this point, students and I jointly design a rubric for the assignment. The students' input here forces them to think about language, structure, audience, and purpose. It also increases their participation in the entire composition process. In addition, because the rubric is limited to only five points, it provides students with a manageable evaluation guide. As students write their first drafts, I am available to answer questions and to guide students through problems of content.

After their first drafts are completed, students work in peer editing groups for one class period, using the rubric as the guide for their discussion. Each group member is encouraged to comment on strengths and weaknesses of each paper and to make suggestions for improvement. Students then complete a second draft, considering the comments of the peer editing group.

At this stage I have a conference with students about their papers. As I meet individually with one student, some students are revising essays and others are reading a literature assignment. The conference is student-directed and lasts between three and seven minutes. The students understand that they must come to the conference ready to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their papers in relation to the rubric. After we confer, students have the option of revising the paper again. I have yet to have a single student who did not choose to revise the paper at least two more times. Some revise even more. With the focus shifted from their grade to their writing, students are more interested in the development of style.

When all the conferences are finished, students begin another writing assignment, and the whole process starts again. Some students are working on more than one composition at a time with this system, and although the classroom may seem chaotic to a visitor, the students operate efficiently, effectively, and enthusiastically.

*Cathy A. D'Agostino, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Illinois*

**"Scar" Stories**

To avoid the "What I Did Last Summer" syndrome or other worn and hackneyed topics, I have devised a versatile writing assignment that rarely fails to galvanize junior and senior high students into writing original and interesting essays. This activity is what my senior creative writing students call our "scar" story.

Most students can recall vividly, and often with pleasure at this age, an illness or injury, especially one that resulted in a lasting physical scar. Most of them are also capable of adding either humor or pathos as they relate the incident. The rubric includes such matters as elaboration, specific concrete details, figurative language, vivid verbs, dialogue, tone, and originality and aptness of thought.

Many students like to illustrate their papers with scenes ranging from the great bicycle crash to the hospital emergency room. Some attach actual photos or other memorabilia of the event or make related collages. When students read their stories aloud to the class, they often employ sound effects (taped or live) or involve other students in the presentation.

What I especially like about this assignment is that it appeals to students of every ability level, most likely because each student is the authority on his or her own topic. Also, I can avoid the common complaints that "I don't know anything to write about" or "I can't write on that topic." An additional benefit is that students can later rework their "scar" stories into short stories, plays, or poetry.

*Rachel Faries, Alton High School, Alton, Illinois*

**The Class Journal**

Journals have worked their way into English classrooms in a variety of ways over the years. They have proved to be useful writing and learning tools for students and teachers alike, but they lose their effectiveness when teachers assign too many typical topics or when students lose momentum, fall behind, and then write page after page of entries the night before journals are due. The class journal provides a means for ungraded, consistent student writing and dialogue without having students write in separate journals every week. It can be used as a supplement to other writing methods and is also an effective way for students

to write with a different voice and to a different audience. I got this idea in 1986 from Mrs. Howarth, a high school English teacher in Princeton, New Jersey.

A sturdy notebook provides each class with a journal that is to be shared by all the members of the class. Every night, one student takes the journal home and writes an entry in it. An entry consists of the student's name and the date at the top of the page and usually a full page of writing on any topic that might be of interest to the class (and to me, too, for I also participate by writing in the journal). At the beginning of the next class, this student passes the journal on to another student, who then takes the journal home and adds his or her entry. Students pass the journal on until every student has written in it, and then the process repeats itself.

When I first introduce the idea at the beginning of the year, we discuss various ideas for journal entries and make a list of possible starting points—interesting stories, opinions, poems, drawings, letters, thoughts on school policies, and so forth. I ask students to copy the list in the front of their own notebooks so that they will have some ideas when their turn comes, but I find that students rarely need to resort to that list. By the time it's their turn to take the journal, they have plenty of ideas to share.

I have noticed several results from using the class journal with both my seventh graders and ninth graders. First, after a few stilted accounts of summer vacations, students tend to relax and to write loose, free-flowing prose. Without the pressure of being graded and with the new sense of audience, students write in quite a different way than they do in their papers, or even in private journals that only the teacher will read. Conversations begin, and ideas are freely shared. Although not all students embrace this idea or this format, a collection of entries can often reflect the personality of a class. I remember one class that started writing in a specific letter format, opening each entry with "Dear Journal," and closing with "Sincerely," followed by the writer's name. A second class taped pictures and cards and student drawings in the journal, while another created "The Quote of the Margin" on each page. I also encourage students to respond to one another in their entries, not just to write isolated pieces, and this suggestion seems to help them initiate dialogues.

Sometimes students write inappropriate material, but I respond by speaking to the class as a whole and to the individual students who are

responsible. And, not surprisingly, sometimes students lose the journal, although pressure from other students and genuine interest seem to keep the journal appearing in class each day. For less responsible classes, however, I write on the board the name of the student who is taking the journal home that day; this student is responsible for the journal and will have to replace it if it does happen to get lost.

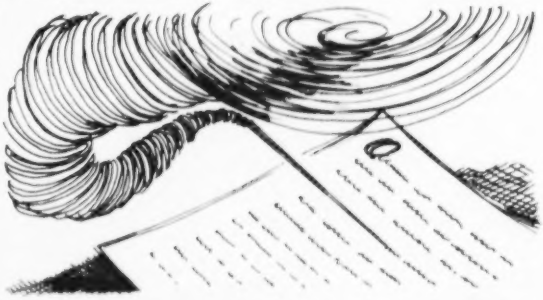
On its own or as a supplement to individual journals, the class journal becomes yet another vehicle for writing outside of the English classroom. I find that students both enjoy and learn from sharing the journal, and I often have to remind them to keep from reading it during class.

*Susie Mees Longfield, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

**Teaching the Disaster Story**

We have successfully used this assignment in our eleventh-grade classes to combine students' descriptive writing techniques (both subjective and objective) with narrative and expository writing. This activity reinforces library skills and provides practice in punctuating dialogue. It encourages students to channel their creative thoughts into the short-story format and to combine their thoughts with historical facts.

Students spend one to two days in the library researching a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, volcanic eruption, flood, tornado, or blizzard. They may also use tragic accidents such as fires, plane crashes, and disasters at sea. They are asked to exclude acts of war.



In the library, students record the basic facts pertaining to the disaster—the who, what, when, where, how, why, and to what extent. These facts become the basic elements of each student's story and will be summarized at the story's conclusion as an epilogue.

Next, students need to make some character decisions for their stories. Will they write the action in first person as though they were experiencing the disaster firsthand, or will they act as an omniscient narrator? Will the

main character be a real person who experienced the disaster, or will the main character be their own creation? Students are to pay close attention to their characters—to make these characters as real as possible by using dialogue with their exposition to show the characters in action. Otherwise, students tend merely to *tell* the plot and the effects on their characters, rather than to *show* it. If the disaster is told from the viewpoint of one character and there are no other characters involved, students can be encouraged to write an interior monologue in which the sole character carries on a conversation with himself or herself.

Occasionally, students will select a disaster in which there were no survivors. They then must creatively supply a method through which the story can be told, such as the story being sent as a message in a bottle or being told by ghosts or heavenly beings.

Because students have a starting point for their stories once they select a disaster, this assignment has not seemed quite as formidable as one that asks students to come up with all the ingredients of the short story on their own. It also provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their creativity and even dramatic flare by placing their characters in a threatening situation.

*Shirley Jean Nix and Donna Sutton, Castle High School, Newburgh, Indiana*

**"What's the Point?"**

Anthropological sociologists consider storytelling one of our primal urges. Most people are eager to share their experiences—to tell their stories—but not all have the same natural storytelling ability. We've probably all had the experience of listening to a friend share a long, rambling story and of asking ourselves (and maybe even our friend), "What's the point?"

Teachers and peer readers sometimes ask the same question after reading student-written narratives. Even after students have learned how to include sensory detail and develop characterization, they may still have difficulty developing a point. I developed the following pre-writing strategy to focus special attention on the value of "getting to the point."

First, I list four categories on the board: occupation, animal, geographical place, color. I ask students to come to the board and write under one of the categories. Below is a sample list:

| Occupation | Animal | Geographical Place | Color |
|---|---|---|---|
| dentist | cow | Oz | red |
| lawyer | giraffe | New York | mauve |
| construction worker | toad | the Arctic Circle | grey |
| police officer | dog | Paris | brown |
| pilot | hippopotamus | Ruston, LA | purple |
| minister/ priest | llama | Siberia | aqua |
| engineer | parrot | New Orleans | yellow |
| teacher | rabbit | Australia | pink |
| cab driver | rooster | Miami | white |
| secretary | groundhog | the Grand Canyon | orange |

Each student fills in one blank. (Depending on the number of students in the class, there may not be enough students to fill in a final row of four items. In this case, the remaining student[s] can instead add a second animal to a row of their choice.)

Next, we read James Thurber's "The Unicorn in the Garden" so that students may study the modern fable. In addition to reviewing the fable for order, conflict, sensory support, and characterization, we look closely at the moral, the "point."

At this time, students are grouped according to rows on the board. For example, the four students who wrote "dentist," "cow," "Oz," and "red" make up one group. I explain that the assignment is for each group to create an original fable based on their items. I encourage students to be imaginative in inventing a storyline that uses all their elements, and, just as importantly, to remember that their fable must lead up to a moral—a point. Students brainstorm ideas and work together in their groups, finally creating clean copies of their fables that can be shared with the class.

Space prohibits including sample fables here, but listed below are a few examples of morals that my students came up with, and the items that inspired them.

Uttering untruths is as painful as pulling teeth.
(dentist, cow, Oz, red)

In Paris, dogs take the bite out of crime.
(police officer, dog, Paris, brown)

You can't get away from the long neck of the law(yer).
(lawyer, giraffe, New York, mauve)

This writing activity maximizes student learning by lessening writing anxiety, providing students a familiar narrative pattern to follow, and involving students in collaborative work. In addition, students feel the pride of authorship as their writings are read aloud and posted on an author board.

And after this activity, I seldom have to ask students who turn in narrative writings, "What's the point?"

*Fran Holman Johnson, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana*

**I Am a Poet**

The jingle "I am a poet and don't know it" has more truth to it than I expected. Suspecting that a hidden poet lurked in even the most reluctant of writers, especially among the nearly all-boy, ninth-grade class I had last year, I searched for a way to unmask these poets who did not know they were poets.

After reading a poem entitled "I Am a Poet" by Barbara Kroll in *Scholastic Voice* (February 4, 1983), I finally hit upon an idea to encourage my students to write vividly with imagery and careful word choice and to find their hidden poets.

Kroll's poem uses precise language and vivid details to create a picture of what the poet is experiencing with her senses. The poem begins, "I hear wind trespassing through trees. I see white crystal clouds shattered by sunset rays." In the three remaining lines, Kroll uses, "I hear . . . ," "I understand . . . ," and "I smell . . . ," to continue the sensory picture. Kroll's poem, with a few modifications, would become a model for my students' own "I Am a Poet" poems. But first, they had to become aware of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile images. To do this, I displayed slides of vivid scenes. (Transparencies of art and photography that are included with many new literature and composition textbooks are useful, too.) As a class, we brainstormed lists of images and wrote them on the board under columns headed "sight," "sound," "smell," "taste," "touch." For example, one slide pictured a mountain meadow. The students listed

for sight imagery such images as "deep blue river," "low valley," "wild flowers."

Next, the class expanded the word and phrase images into sentences with additional detail and attention to vivid word choice to make the image even sharper. Each sentence began with the subject-verb "I see," or "I hear," etc. Thus, "deep blue river" and "low valley" became "I see the deep blue river slithering through the low valleys." "Wild flowers" expanded to "I see the beautiful wild flowers radiantly glowing under the sun."

Finally, the class arranged the sentences into "poetic" form, following the model poem:

I see
    the deep blue river
slithering
    through the low valleys.
I see
    beautiful wild flowers
    radiantly glowing
    under the sun.

After adding other lines, we had a "We Are Poets" poem.

After gaining confidence as group poets, the students were ready to write a solo poem entitled "I Am a Poet." The procedure was essentially the same except for two changes. First, the students chose a picture from a magazine so that each student's poem would be different. (*Smithsonian* and *National Geographic* have especially fine photography.) Students could bring photos from home as well. Second, the students concentrated on generating their images from various sources, as in the model poem. This latter procedure seemed to produce a more unified poem.

One particularly inspired poet, who had produced very little before, saw another picture of a meadow and generated this partial list:

sight: bee
sound: bird's song
touch: clinging weeds
smell: pollen

After writing their poems, the class poets shared their poems in a readers' circle. Many poems were published in the school literary anthology.

Besides gaining confidence in their own writing, the students discovered that language can be fun to play with, that they could invent vivid images, that they had more command of vocabulary than they had thought, and that poetry did not have to rhyme to be poetry. But most of all, they discovered that they were "poets and didn't know it."

*Diane Chandler, Barboursville High School, Barboursville, West Virginia*

**Experimenting with Modifiers**

The modern poet Lewis Turco maintains that poetry, by definition, elevates the language. This writing exercise gets students to think about the power of words, gives them a chance to experiment with creative description, and helps them see how careful word choice can enhance meaning.

First, we brainstorm the names of uncommon or exotic birds, animals, flowers, spices, fabrics, and foods. I record students' suggestions on the board as they are called out. A partial list might look something like this:

| **birds** | **animals** | **flowers** | **spices** | **fabrics** | **foods** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| hummingbird | zebra | orchid | saffron | silk | kiwi |
| hoot owl | mongoose | dogwood | nutmeg | taffeta | pomegranate |
| crane | gazelle | water lily | parsley | chiffon | eel |

Then I ask students to think of people or pets that they would like to describe in a poem. Students might suggest, "my mom," "my friend Julio," "my sister Sara," "my grandpa," "my cat Merlin," "my dog Beanie," and so on.

Next, students individually make lists of characteristics of the person or animal that they want to describe in their poem. A sample list of characteristics might include "eyes, smile, hair, laugh, walk"; or, "fur, belly, paws, purr."

At this point I explain that we are going to use the uncommon nouns to help make our poetic descriptions more vivid. Each student will select uncommon nouns to juxtapose with ordinary nouns, so that the uncommon nouns become modifiers for the ordinary ones.

I suggest that students experiment with different combinations to find the ones they like best. For instance, a student might choose to describe a laugh as "a hoot-owl laugh," "a silk laugh," or "a saffron laugh." Students might make their choices based on the way the words sound together, associations, alliteration, or rhyme.

Finally, students put their descriptions together in a poem in any way they like and, if they want to, read their poems aloud to the class.

Included below are samples of writings produced by this exercise. The first is a poem by a fifth-grade student; the second is an excerpt from a poem by an eighth-grade student.

Merlin
Merlin, my cat
    with her sunflower belly.
She has a honeysuckle body
    with morning glory fur
that floats through my fingers
    like water lilies.

Childhood days
across the street at grandmother's
hordes of mongoose children
eyed me and my unskinned knees curiously.
you included me in their wild
parsley games of hide-and-seek.

*Nancy Williams, Lee High School, Huntsville, Alabama*

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